

SLOPER EXPERIMENTAL CANCELS

By Rosemary Smith

Under an Act of Parliament on October 1st 1870, Postal Stationery Cards were introduced into this country for the first time (they had already been in use in Austria for one year). Two sizes of card were allowed at first, 3½ x 4½ inches and 2½ x 4½ inches; both having ½d stamp, border and wording in violet on light buff card.

The postal authorities knew that these cards would be popular; partly because one purchase would provide, cheaply, both writing material and stamp, and partly because of the convenience for business houses being able to send a short missive instead of a longer letter – a first step towards modern efficiency perhaps - some would say a retrograde step when reading the flowery terms in a Victorian business request for custom or payment of long standing debts. In the event, the Post Office almost ground to a halt. On the first day of issue, over 500,000 cards went through the London G.P.O., and 75 million were used in the first year throughout the country, thus disorganising the cancellation and delivery of the ordinary mail. The scenario was enacted in many of the larger cities which were centres of commerce, such as Liverpool, Manchester and Edinburgh.

Instructions were given to postmasters to concentrate on cancelling letters first no doubt so that the adhesive stamps could not be used again and many cards in the early days were delivered without a forwarding cancellation and only received the date stamp of the Receiving office on the reverse of the card. Some did not even get a receiving mark.

This state of affairs was not very satisfactory and the Post Office turned to Joseph Sloper for a possible solution to the speeding up of cancelling the cards. They were already using one of the Sloper Machines to perforate Money orders with a date and realised the potential for a cancelling device. Being used to making machines which punched holes through cheques, receipts, letters and railway tickets etc., Sloper suggested using a die in one of his machines which would punch an ARROW shape through the printed stamp on the card. For a period in late 1870, early 1871, the Post Office experimented with this machine. (As Fig.1)

Fig.1.

London
17-1-72



Fig.3.

Liverpool
22-3-72

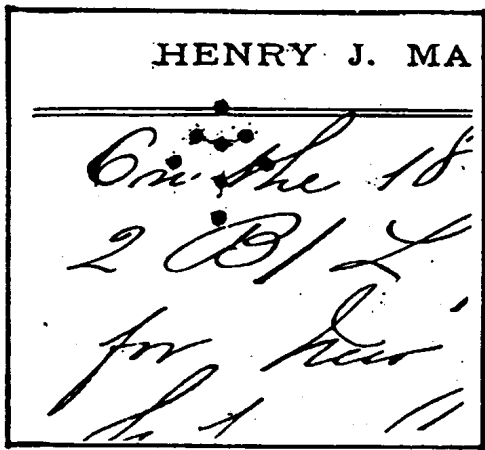


Fig.5.

Liverpool
2-5-74

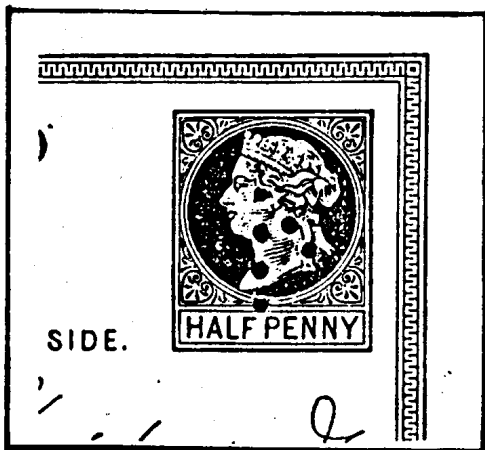


Fig.2.

Liverpool
29-5-73

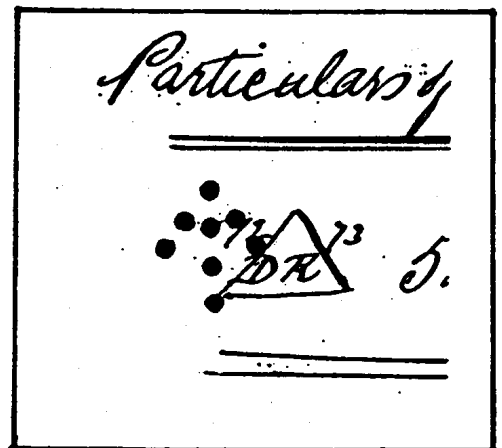


Fig.4.

Liverpool
9-1-73

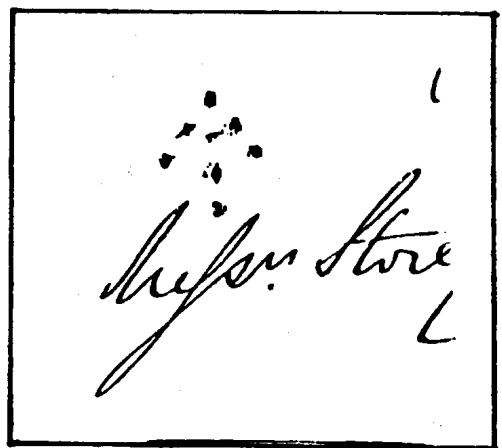
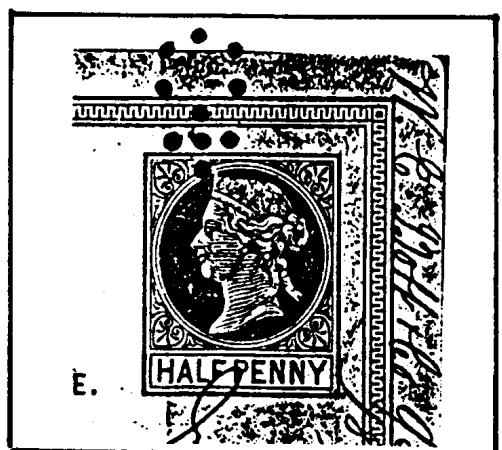


Fig.6.

London
10-11-70



There is a record of a Minute in the P.O. Archives, endorsed "Approved 5th June 1871" which says:

"The enclosed papers relate to a trial which has been made in the Circulation Department of this office, of a perforating machine devised by Mr. Sloper, for the purpose of obliterating the Postage Stamps on Post Cards.

Mr. Boucher reports that this result is satisfactory, and he recommends the adoption of the machine.

At present only four machines will be required, three for the Circulation Department, and one for the Liverpool Post office, and I request your authority for supplying them at the price asked by Mr. Sloper, viz £7/7/0 each, which Mr. Boucher considers not unreasonable.

There may be other Offices, but if so I believe they will be very few, where the quantity of Post Cards posted may be so great as to render it necessary to supply such Offices with the machines."

From a study of the dates of known use, (see table at end of article), Liverpool must have used the prototype 'Arrow' die, (Fig.1) or another similar machine made by Sloper, as Liverpool dates from January 1871 are found. Although the above extract from the P.O. Records Department only mentions one machine for Liverpool, there must have been at least three in use between 1870 and 1875 as three distinct type of holes are found: one with large round, clearly cut holes (Fig.2), a second with smaller holes but still very clearly cut (Fig.3) and a third with small, rough pin-hole type punctures (Fig.4). The latter cards usually show the impression of the jaws holding the pins too.

At this time, late 1870, the London Office also used a punch in the shape of a ORB & CROSS (Fig.6). This punch has also been found with the cross at the top (normal) and the cross at the bottom (inverted). As far as I am aware there has been no actual documentary proof that this was supplied by Sloper but it is almost certain that the presumption of a Sloper machine is correct. This Orb & Cross experimental cancel would seem to have been the first one to be discontinued, although B.F. Grounsell Dammers, in an article in the Postal History Society Bulletin for June 1948,

Fig.7.

Manchester

9-1-73

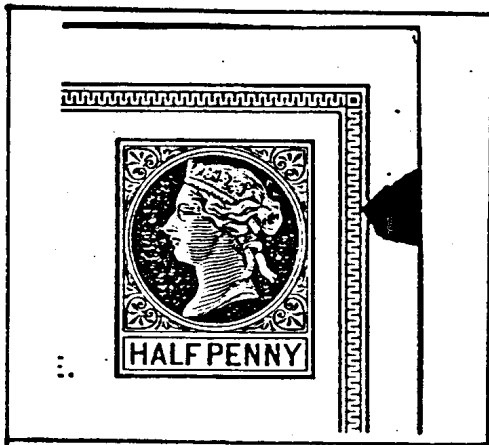


Fig.8.

Manchester

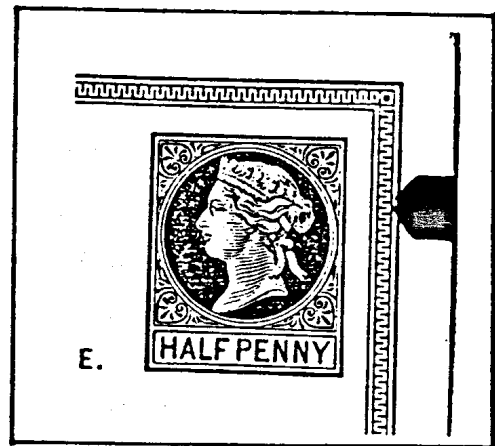


Fig.9.

Manchester

21-9-71

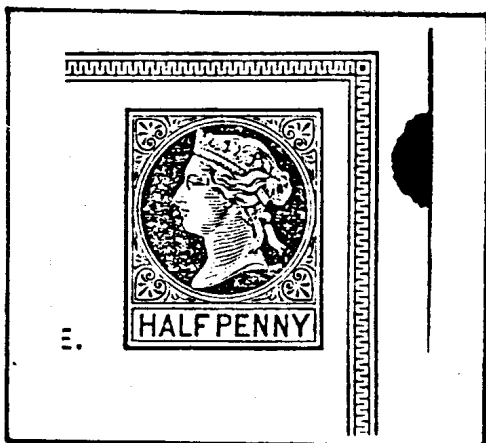


Fig.10.

Bradford

6-11-71

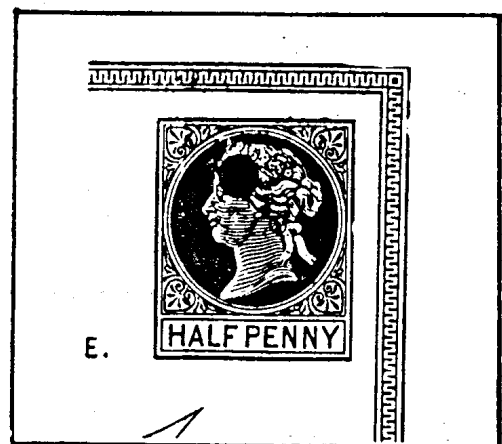
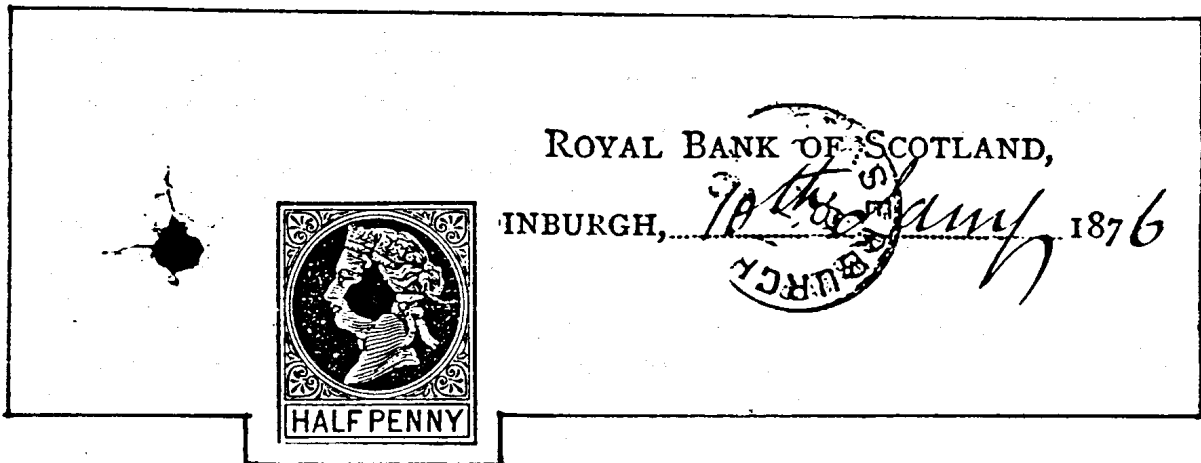


Fig.11.

Edinburgh

10-1-76



gives a late date of 23-2-72 for the orb and Cross. I have only seen cards or photocopies of cards from late in 1870. My own copy is an inverted punch dated 9-11-70.

The 'Broad Arrow' die supplied by Sloper had 8 holes, each of 2mm diameter. The pins were of hardened steel and unusually long and tapering to give extra strength and clear penetration. Remember the material for puncturing was card not paper. The one inch long pins were designed to puncture 96 cards at one press - a pack of cards as sold over the Post Office counter numbered 24. If enough of these cards are examined one can see which cards would have been at the top of the pack and which at the bottom from the width of the hole. Those at the bottom of the pack, where the pin tapered the most, would have a smaller diameter of hole.

Constant penetration of so many cards put great strain on the pins and there are many examples of 'out of alignment' holes or 'missing pin' varieties. Most of these are from Liverpool after 1872 and one can only conjecture that Sloper kept an eye on the London operation, instructing on the correct load for the machine, whilst the Liverpool machine was grossly over-worked. The varieties from Liverpool are less rare than the complete strike (Fig.5).

In the meantime, other large provincial towns were trying their own experiments. Again, there is no documentary evidence that these punches originated from Sloper. Manchester tried taking out a CLIP from the edge of the card, adjacent to the stamp. The clip would appear to have been produced by using something akin to a railway ticket punch. Three main types of shapes can be seen on the cards from Manchester; a bracket cut (Fig.7), a spear cut (Fig.8) and a half round cut (Fig.9), but even these three shapes had variations and many of the cuts are so oddly shaped that it is not possible to say to which type they belong. Dates for Manchester clips have been reported from 11-11-70 to 22-1-75.

Some Offices tried a SINGLE HOLE punch. They were Birmingham, Bradford, Edinburgh and Liverpool. I have not seen any examples from Birmingham or Liverpool and the one recorded date for Liverpool - 19/10/70 - would suggest it was very

short lived and was superseded by the Liverpool Arrow. The examples I have from Bradford, and all others I have seen from there, are large, clean cut holes, 3mm in diameter (Fig.10). My copies from Edinburgh are smaller and rough cut, again with the impressions from the base of the die similar to the third Liverpool machine (Fig.11). The Edinburgh Hole would appear to have had the longest life, one of my cards is dated 10-1-76. Once again no documentary proof of the maker of these perforators, but all cancels - Arrows, Clips, Orb and Cross and Holes - have become known as the Sloper Experimental Cancels.

One nice piece of confirming evidence has come to light in the Sloper Record Books now held by the Society. David Scott found the following entry in the 1873 Machine Ledger but there is no mention of the supply of the original machine, although David has made a thorough search. Hopefully, the illustration shows that this entry was for a repair to the die on September 17th 1873 and unless it was for a repair to a Liverpool machine, later dates from London than that shown in the Table must" exist.

September 17 th £ 35/5-	Large N. & G. P. O. —
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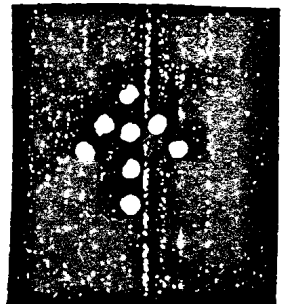
Machine repaired — Drilled with 5-1 wire	
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TABLE OF DATES FOR SLOPER EXPERIMENTAL CANCELS

ARROW PERFORATIONS

London:- 24-11-70 to 8-3-73

Liverpool:- 8-1-72 to 21-1-75

Liverpool

(missing pins) from July 1872

MANCHESTER CLIPS

Half Round Cut:- 11-11-70 to 1-5-74

Spear Cut:- 3-12-70 to 25-11-74

Bracket Cut:- 15-6-71 to 22-1-75

SINGLE HOLE PUNCH

Birmingham:- 27-9-72 to 28-7-73

Edinburgh:- 4-4-71 to 10-1-76

Liverpool:- 19-10-70

Bradford:- 30-1-71 to 6-11-71

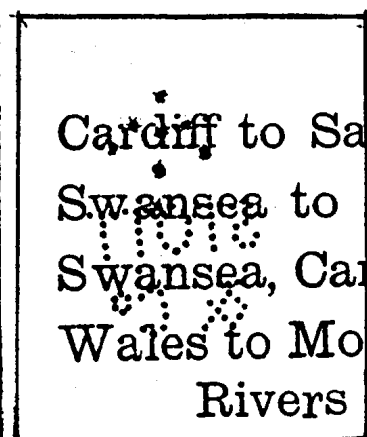
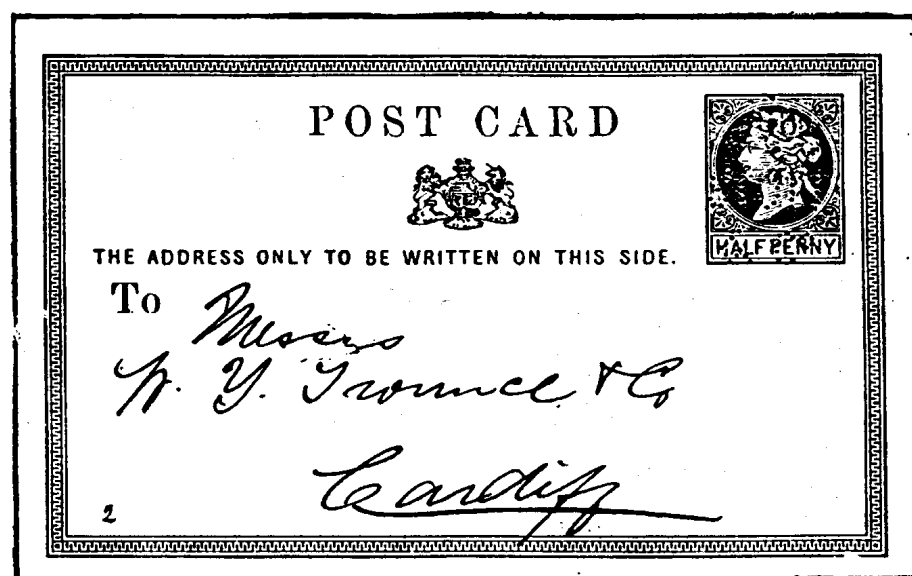
ORB AND CROSS PERFORATION

London - Cross at top:- 3-11-7

London - Cross at bottom:- 27-10-70 to 23-2-72

A UNIQUE ITEM?

I am grateful to NORMAN HEWERDINE for allowing me to photocopy this Postal Stationery Card. It has the full name perfin of STOTT & CO (S7490.01) and also a Liverpool Arrow. The card is from Liverpool and dated February 2nd 1874. This is the only 'double' I have seen.



These experimental cancels ceased in January 1875 (with one odd reporting of a card dated 14-1-77 in Jennings' Book). By this time some Offices were selling the cards in packs of 24 already perforated. They were handed back over the P.O. counter from the firm using them for their business, and they received no further cancellations. Could these be classed as the only pre-cancels ever used in Britain?

Apart from information gleaned from my own collection of Sloper Experimental Cancels and noting dates etc. from all cards seen in dealers stocks, I obtained some information from the G.P.O. Postal Headquarters in London and from odd pieces written in Philatelic Journals over the years, viz:

- 1897 The English Specialists' Journal, "Perforated Cancellations" by R. Bradshaw Smith.
- 1948 Postal History Society Bulletin N°44. "Clipped and Perforated Cancellations" by B.F. Hounsell Dammers.
- 1949 The Postal Cancellations of London 1840-1890 H.C. Westley H.F. Johnson Chapter 5. 'Postcards. Sloper's Patent'.
- 1953 Postal History Society Bulletin N°70. "Clipped and Perforated Cancellations of Great Britain" by W.L. Freshwater.
- 1968 Charles Jennings "The History of British Security Stamps", Chapter 21, 'Perforated Postal Stationery'.
- 1974 The Collectors Club Philatelist Vol 23 N°2.
"Experimental Cancellations on the First Post Card Issue of Great Britain" by Abbot Lutz.

I hope this history will go some way to answering the many questions I have received asking for information about the Sloper Experimental Cancels. If any member can supply me with any other reference for articles on this subject, earlier or later dates for any of these cancels, photocopies of front and back of ANY cards and particularly details of any cards which you may wish to sell, I would be pleased to hear from you.

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